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SUBJECT: SUDAN: FRENCH URGE U.S. TO PROMOTE KHARTOUM-REBEL DIALOGUE

PARIS 00000964 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d).).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Presidential AF-advisor Romain Serman on May 19 urged the USG to support dialogue between the Government of Sudan and rebel factions, especially JEM, as a way to breaking the cycle of rebel attacks against Khartoum and N'Djamena. He said that the budding political dialogue between the Deby government and Chadian rebels was showing promise and believed that a similar process needed to begin in Sudan. Serman said that it was not enough simply to urge both Chad and Sudan to cease supporting the other's rebels. The U.S. would be key to encouraging political dialogue, with Libya and China prepared to play supporting roles. Serman urged rapid action -- within the next two weeks -- as opportunities would slip thereafter, with increased NGO pressure as the Olympics draw closer and with the change in the U.S. administration. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) We met on May 19 with Romain Serman, an AF-advisor at the French presidency. Displaying his usual energy and intensity, Serman said that he had an important message for Washington. Serman said that it was now necessary for the Government of Sudan to engage with Sudan's rebels, most notably JEM but also with Abdulwahid and other faction leaders, in an effort to stop the fighting. The policy of repeating the mantra that both Chad and Sudan needed to stop supporting the other's rebel groups was no longer effective, he said, and needed to be replaced by a policy of eliminating the rebel groups. Not by military means, he added, but rather by encouraging political dialogue and compromise that would allow for cooperation between the rebels and Khartoum.

¶3. (C) Serman said that France and the U.S. were key to such a process, as the various players (e.g., the several rebel groups and N'Djamena and Khartoum) would listen to France and the U.S., both of which were already quite engaged in the region. Serman noted also that Libya and China could, and seemed prepared to, play supporting roles in this effort.

The U.S. should use its influence to bring the Government of Sudan into dialogue with the rebels, primarily JEM but the others as well. The recent JEM offensive, Serman believe, had scared Khartoum and perhaps rendered GOS leaders more amenable to dealing with the rebels.

¶4. (C) Serman said that France had worked hard in Chad to develop some semblance of political dialogue and increased inclusiveness on the part of the Deby regime. He said that rebel leaders Nouri and the Erdimis were talking to N'Djamena. While much remained to be accomplished, there was

the beginning of a process in place in Chad, and this could lead to a decision by the rebels to cease fighting and to work with the Deby regime. Serman said that something similar had to be established in Sudan, which would allow the government and rebels at least the possibility of settling their differences.

¶ 15. (C) Serman said that it would be important to take action quickly, within the next two weeks. He said that with the arrival of June, media attention would focus on Darfur in relation to the approaching Olympic Games in China, which might make it more difficult for all sides to concede in the name of compromise. Serman noted that President Sarkozy would meet privately with film director Steven Spielberg on May 21, with Darfur expected to be the main topic of conversation. As the Olympics approached, Serman predicted that celebrity activists would raise Darfur's profile. This was not necessarily bad but might complicate the decision-making of those who would prefer doing so out of the spotlight. The U.S. elections in the fall and the change in administration could also make it difficult for the U.S. to take decisive action. Hence the need to act sooner rather than later.

¶ 16. (C) Serman said that the GOF had been particularly blunt with China in recent discussions. Serman said that he had pointed out to the Chinese that JEM's recent attack showed that the Khartoum regime was not as strong as it (and others) thought it to be. Although forced to retreat, JEM elements had taken with them large quantities of weapons they had seized from government stocks during their march on Khartoum. JEM could be back, just as the Chadian rebels almost succeeded in February 2008 after their earlier near-miss in April 2006. Serman said that he painted a dire scenario for

PARIS 00000964 002.2 OF 002

the Chinese. If the fighting continued, there could be a rebel attack on the Abyei oilfields, renewed North-South fighting, an inability on Khartoum's part to control as well Sudan's eastern and northern regions. Serman said that the Chinese were sobered by these possibilities and seemed prepared to support Government-Rebel dialogue. Serman referred less directly to Libya, but indicated that Libya could play a supportive and positive role as well.

¶ 17. (C) Serman said that President Sarkozy would likely raise Darfur and the need for a framework that would allow the government and rebels to reconcile, with President Bush during the latter's planned June visit to Paris. Serman hope that by then Washington would have signaled its support for the outline he had presented.

¶ 18. (U) MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

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